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AN INTERVIEW WITH

NICHOLAS MURRAY BUTLER

BY

EDWARD MARSHALL

Reprinted from The New York Times of May 16, 1915

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It was Nicholas Murray Butler, President of Columbia University, who first predicted that in the course of this European war the United States of America would develop a world importance hitherto unknown to it.

Since the interview in which he made that prediction exactly this has happened. So, many months afterward, I went to him again with a request for an interpretation of his original statement in the light of new events.

"You said that this war between other nations would make the United States for the first time a world power," I suggested. "It has done that. Now what is the underlying significance of the event?"

"That is a pretty large and a very delicate subject to discuss," he answered. "When one speaks of the United States as a world power, and of its future opportunities as such, one must stop to ask whether he is using the term 'world power' in the military sense, with reference to the rule of force, or in the moral sense, with reference to the rule of ideals and of law. The history of the world makes it pretty plain that there is a distinction between the two.

"Our present-day philosophy of life makes it equally plain that it is world power resting on ideals and on

law that the United States should aim at—the world-power of the future—and not the sort of world power which rests on force—the world power of the past.

" With the passing of the years, with the increase in area and the multiplication of population, the United States has become at once the largest, richest, and the most powerful exemplar of democratic institutions on the globe.

" Any claim which it may have to being a world power today and any hope which it may have of increasing or extending this world power in future, must rest upon its being true to the ideals and aims of democracy, not only in form but in spirit and in fact.

" The very just indignation of the American people at the destruction of the Lusitania, involving, as it did, the loss of hundreds of lives of neutrals and non-combatants, including many women and children, as well as the inexplicable attack upon the American ship Gulflight," said he, "only emphasize the necessity of maintaining our attitude of strict neutrality and of enforcing the rights which attach to neutrals. To do this will of itself be a manifestation of world power on a great scale."

" The present situation is very acute and very difficult, but it ought not and I think will not be beyond the power of the American government and the American people to deal with it in a spirit of justice that will both emphasize and enforce our position as a neutral nation and resist any effort either to drive or to tempt us to join the ranks of the belligerents."

America's Opportunity

" Can we not say that the opportunity of the United States just now to exercise a peaceful power is greater than the opportunity ever confronting any nation to exercise military power? " I suggested.

"Yes, I should think so," President Butler answered. "It is a fact that the way in which the neutrality of the United States has been manifested in the present war has not wholly commended us as a people to any one of the belligerent powers.

"This, perhaps, was to be expected; but it would be unfortunate if any feeling of criticism of the United States for having done some things and for having omitted to do others, should extend to the point of weakening European confidence in the ability and willingness of the American people to do justice between the belligerents and the policies they represent, when this war shall come to an end.

"The notion that the present struggle is a European war, in which no one has any interest except the governments and citizens of the several belligerent powers, is grotesque.

"It is a world war in which every neutral power is more or less involved and the huge cost of which every neutral power will be called upon to share more or less heavily.

"It may be safely predicted that when the bills are all in and receipted a generation or two hence, the cost to the people of the United States will prove to have been stupendous."

Why It Is Our Duty to Do What We Can

"All these are reasons why the world power of the American democracy ought of right to be exerted and should, as a matter of policy and of national interest, be exerted when hostilities shall end, to compose the differences and the difficulties out of which this war has grown; and they are also reasons why nothing should be done which will weaken our world influence.

"It is a very difficult and delicate matter to suggest

to another people that one's own form of government is better than that which, at the moment, they enjoy. This is something which the United States could not formally or officially do.

" Nevertheless, it would be sheer hypocrisy to conceal the fact that the public opinion of the United States is substantially unanimous in holding that the peace of the world is more secure when foreign relations and foreign policies are determined and controlled by representatives of the people, than when these are wholly confided to dynasties or to diplomats, however beloved or however talented.

" The democratic principle cannot be said to insure international peace, but with equal certainty it can be said to make impossible certain kinds of war. It makes impossible all those numerous wars that grow out of dynastic ambitions and policies, out of secret alliances and out of confidential understandings of one sort and another between monarchs and foreign offices. "

Democratic Principles Decrease Chance of War

" The democratic principle for which the United States stands and which, after allowing for all mistakes and inequities, it has done so much to advance, diminishes the chance of conflict based upon difference in language, difference in religion and difference in race, by insisting that no one of these differences be given any recognition before the law.

" It is obvious that if the United States is to achieve and exercise a world power based upon its sincere democracy, we must have a care that at home these principles are always kept clearly in mind and are not departed from in our own political practice.

" We have among us a good many people, and some groups of importance and considerable size, that are not inclined to be any too particular about insisting

upon the application of these fundamental democratic principles, if, by overlooking them, they themselves can gain some immediate political or personal end.

" To all such, it may be pointed out that while, of course, a nation must protect itself, morally, intellectually, and physically, yet it must protect itself by the application of its fundamental principles and not by the denial or forgetfulness of them. "

American Generosity and Sympathy Sure to Impress

" One trait the people of the United States possess to an extent that never before has been recorded in the history of any nation, and that is the admirable trait of generosity and sympathy for the distressed, the afflicted, and the stricken in any part of the world. Recognition of this fact must add greatly to our world influence.

" At the very time that some European observers have been denouncing the American people as mere traders, making money and gain out of the distressful conflict in Europe, those same American people have been pouring out not only millions of dollars, but life, energy, and service in the effort to carry food and clothing to the starving and ill-clad Belgians, to eliminate the fearful plague of typhus in Serbia, and to aid in giving the best medical and surgical service to the sick and wounded in the armies of Germany, Austria, Russia, France, and Great Britain.

" It may very well be doubted if anywhere in history there is recorded an equal display, prompt and overwhelming, of generous aid and tender human sympathy, regardless of the station, rank, nationality, or opinions of those who needed help.

" That reveals a people playing the Good Samaritan on a huge scale and it illustrates what I mean by world

leadership based on ideals. The nation whose people render services like these will never be forgotten in tens of thousands of villages and farm firesides all the way from the North Sea to the Caucasus."

"Are you willing," I asked President Butler, "to tell how we should take advantage of the world power into which we have developed—to discuss what we ought to stand for, why we do not now stand for more, and how we could stand for most?"

"If one is asked what power the United States can exert at the conclusion of this war," he replied, "no definite answer can be given at the moment, because everything will depend upon which of the combatants is victorious. In any case, however, the United States ought to direct the attention of the nations now belligerent to these specific points:

Specific Points for International Consideration

"First.—That the various Hague Conventions, solemnly entered into in 1899 and in 1907, have been violated frequently since the outbreak of hostilities, and that, obviously, some greater and more secure sanction for such Conventions must be provided in the future.

"Second.—That in not a few instances the rules and usages of international law have been thrown to the winds, to the discredit of the belligerents themselves and to the grave distress, physically and commercially, of neutral powers.

"Of course everyone understands that international law is merely a series of conventions without other than moral sanction. If, however, the world has gone back to the point where a nation's plighted faith is not moral sanction enough, then that fact and its implications ought to be clearly understood and appropriate punitive action provided for.

" Third.—That any attempt to submerge nationalities in nations other than their own is certain to result in friction and conflict in the not distant future. Any attempt to create new nations, or to enlarge or diminish the area of nations, without having regard to nationality, is simply to organize a future war.

" Fourth.—That the transfer of sovereignty over any given district or people without their consent, is certainly an unwise, and probably an unjust, action for any government to take, having regard for the peace and happiness of the world.

" Fifth.—That the international organization which had been carried so far in such fields as maritime law, postal service, railway service, and international arbitration, should be taken up anew and pursued more vigorously, but upon a sounder and a broader foundation, and made a certain means of protecting the smaller and the weaker nations.

" Sixth.—That competitive armaments, instead of being an assurance against war, are a sure cause of war and an equally certain preventive of those policies of social reform and advance that enlightened peoples everywhere are eager to pursue.

" Everything would depend upon the sincerity, the good temper and the sympathy with which suggestions such as these were made and followed up. "

" Are you willing to say that if the tendency toward a United States of Europe develops—and you were the first to predict it at the time of the outbreak of the war—it should be our especial duty to stimulate such a spread of democracy in any way which we could? "

How We Can Help Toward European Democracy

" I should say, " said President Butler, " that if as some of us have hoped and felt—and as Mr. As-

quith, in one of the greatest speeches made since the war began, clearly indicated there is reason to hope—the nations of Europe may find some method after the war of so organizing as to develop a common will, then we should point out to them the lessons which the history of our own federal system can teach.

"No one in his senses could suppose that Europe, with its varied races and languages, ever could be welded into such a national unit as the United States, all resting on a common English speech and the English common law; but the principle which the United States Government exemplifies is applicable, in my judgment, *mutatis mutandis,* to a United States of Europe.

"The beginnings of the central organ of the common will would probably be very simple and very slight. They might be chiefly judicial in character; if so, then so much the better.

"Some of the Justices of the first United States Supreme Court wanted to resign because no case came before the Court for a year after it was organized. They said there was no need for such a court, that there was nothing for it to do.

"The world could very well afford to have Europe begin in the same simple way and trust to the force of ideas and the interest of nations in co-operation—their financial, their commercial, their intellectual interests—to strengthen and develop whatever organ they chose to create at the outset."

"Have not all the greatest achievements of the United States tended toward peace, even though they have been warlike?" I asked. "Even the Spanish War was not an attack upon a people at peace, but a war for the purpose of stopping war."

"The events of the early spring and the summer of 1898 are sometimes spoken of as the Spanish-Ameri-

can War," replied President Butler. "To me they have always seemed more like the doing of such work as the police and fire departments combined might be called upon to perform in a great city.

"What was done then by the United States was, to all intents and purposes, to suppress a riot and to put out a conflagration. If the United States had enriched itself as a result of that action by annexing the island of Cuba, the action itself would have lost all its moral significance."

Senator Root Responsible for the Platt Amendment

"Through the action taken at the instance of Senator Teller of Colorado and that taken at the instance of Senator Platt of Connecticut (although in fairness to both the living and the dead it ought to be said that the hand which drew the Platt Amendment was that of Elihu Root) the United States made it plain that what it was doing was being done in the interest of the people of Cuba and in the interest of humanity. In the large sense, therefore, this whole undertaking was a policy making for peace, for good order, for human happiness.

"In the same way, it was to a President of the United States and to his Secretary of State that the governments of Japan and Russia turned, in the spring of 1905, with a view to securing assistance in bringing the costly and bloody conflict to Manchuria to an end.

"Both through its action in regard to Cuba and its action in regard to the Russo-Japanese War, to say nothing of its consistent attitude toward the government of the people of China, the United States has won the regard and respect of thoughtful and liberal-minded men in all parts of the globe. It is such acts as

these which promote world confidence in us and assure world power for us.

" It is not possible to touch upon these topics without some mention of Mexico, where conditions are extremely difficult and very perplexing. "

What We Can Do for Mexico

" There is no use now in discussing what might have been done three years ago or two years ago that would have led to an improvement in the existing situation.

" The undisputed facts are that chaos rules in Mexico, that American lives have been sacrified and others are in danger, and that much property belonging to Americans has been damaged or destroyed, and more of it is still threatened with damage or destruction there.

" Is it quite clear that the people of the United States have no duty whatever in regard to this matter, but should merely stand aside and let the various armed bands of Mexicans kill each other indefinitely, as well as destroy the lives and property, not only of Americans, but of citizens of European nations? Are we or are we not our brothers' keepers?

" These questions are not to be lightly answered, for anything that would plunge us into war with the Mexican people, or anything that might possibly lead to an extension of our territory or wealth at their expense, would be deplorable, and perhaps disastrous to us.

" Nor could we take any line of action that would expose us to suspicion in the minds of other American republics on the ground that the United States, as an Anglo-Saxon and Anglo-Celtic nation, was oppressing a Latin people or aggrandizing itself at their expense.

" The policy that most commends itself to my judgment, if a task similar to that performed seventeen years ago in Cuba ultimately becomes necessary, is to

communicate our plans and policies to the governments of the other American Republics and to ask the co-operation of at least some of them—for example, Argentina, Brazil, Chili, Uruguay, and Peru—in putting into effect whatever policies of a police character were jointly determined to be necessary in the interest of civilization and that of the Mexican people themselves.

"If it be objected that no one of these American republics has any direct interest in Mexico, the answer is that we have a very direct interest in having them have a sufficient interest in Mexico to protect us from misunderstanding and unfriendly criticism on their own part."

To Get South American Help the Wisest Way

"It is earnestly to be hoped that the Mexican people will speedily find some way of restoring orderly government for themselves, but it must be confessed that every week that passes makes the prospect of this seem less likely.

"Of course, it is not possible for a policeman or a fireman to attempt to settle a row in the street without running some risk of getting hurt, but that risk would be reduced to a minimum if the confidence and co-operation of a half dozen other American republics should be secured before the task was undertaken at all.

"Such an act would, of itself, be an illustration of what is meant by exercising world power. It would illustrate the value of bringing other free and enlightened peoples to our side to perform a public-spirited act, and it would illustrate and emphasize the moral purpose of performing that act in the interest of Mexico and the Mexican people without any thought or purpose of self-aggrandizement. It would give a

new and generous interpretation to the Monroe Doctrine.

" Our people have not yet appreciated how much we need, and would profit by, closer friendship and fuller understanding with the peoples of the other American republics. Every one of the efforts now being made to bring those peoples nearer to us, to understand more completely their point of view, their history, their literature, their institutions, and every effort to break down the barrier of language which separates us, deserves the heartiest support. The relation we seek with them is not a relation in which we are to exercise power, but one in which we and they together are to exercise an influence that is higher and better than mere power, because it is the outgrowth of our common devotion to democratic institutions and our complete and sympathetic understanding of what the very word ' America ' typifies and signifies. "

Other Indications of World Power

" And there are other things that indicate a growth of such world power in the hands of the United States. Robert College at Constantinople, on the banks of the Bosporus, and the American Protestant College at Beirut in Syria, are two of the most extraordinary examples of American influence anywhere in the world. Practically every leader of the liberal movement in Bulgaria has been educated in Robert College, which is supported entirely by American money, and the most enlightened young Turks, Arabs, and Greeks are to be found among the 400 or 500 students in the Syrian Protestant College at Beirut.

" These institutions represent the New England college transferred to the shores of the Mediterranean and the banks of the Bosporus, and they are teaching, not only the usual letters, science and philosophy, but

American ideals, American thought, American institutions to the young men who are shaping or are going to shape the civilization of the Eastern Mediterranean countries."

Industrial as Well as Political World Power

"A great many of our European friends believe, as I myself believe, that a concomitant and necessary element of international peace is industrial peace, and we in the Carnegie Endowment have sent to Europe for the last year or more, first on our own initiative and then in response to many questions, all the information that we could get about Mr. Henry Ford's profit sharing undertaking at Detroit, and also about the United States Steel Corporation's capital plan for caring for and helping its workers.

"The United States Steel Corporation issues an illustrated monthly journal. Sometimes I have written to the Steel Corporation and obtained several hundred of these to send to as many European addresses, because they contained striking pictures of workmen's cottages with little gardens and vines, and showed the admirable conditions under which the Steel Corporation is helping its men to live. I have secured as many copies as I could of the literature pertaining to Mr. Ford's profit sharing scheme and have used them in a similar manner. And that, too, helps build up world power for the United States.

"This is what I mean by the peaceful infiltration of ideas. It goes much farther than the work of diplomatist; it works away down under the surface of life."

"We really have before us, then, a very great opportunity to promote international peace throughout the world?"

"Yes."

" We have an indirect and somewhat indefinite, but none the less real opportunity to promote industrial peace throughout the world by the force of example. Big things are going to be worked out there in Detroit and elsewhere. That is true, isn't it?"

" Certainly. "

" The Mexican situation confronts us directly, does it not—the question of peace beyond the Rio Grande? "

" Yes. "

" And if we promote and truly encourage friendly feeling from and toward the South American republics, we can insure on this continent something which would be infinitely better than a United States of the two Americas, in the form of a double continent in which war is practically certain never to occur? "

" Yes. And there is another thing. We can do what has been in the back of the heads of a number of South American statesmen. We can unite with the South American republics to say, ' Now, you gentlemen of Europe, if you must fight, we serve notice that you have got to fight on your side of the world. You must not do any more fighting off the Falkland Islands, or in the waters of Chili, or in the Caribbean Sea, or anywhere else about here. Please stay on your side of the Atlantic when you go to war. ' The doctrine of Mare Liberum is in need of restatement so far as vessels of war are concerned. "

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